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Hungry Indians

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"Dec. 11, 1855. This has been a noted day to me. I have seen Indians today, something new", wrote Jane Bicknell in her diary. She was living with her parents and attending school in Cedar Falls at that time. "Mr. Daget came into the school room and sayed there were some Indians in town and we must go and see them, and so we did. The Indians had on blankets." How familiar the sight of Indians with blankets and without was destined to become! Before the spring of 1857 Jane Bicknell would have gone farther with even more alacrity to avoid them.

On September 21, 1856, Ambrose S. Mead "from Buena Vista County" visited at the Bicknell home in Cedar Falls. About the same time Christian Kirchner with his wife and ten children arrived from New York on his way to northwestern Iowa where his two sons, J. A. and Jacob Kirchner, had located claims and erected a log cabin earlier in the season. Mr. Mead and the Kirchners must have told glowing tales of the fertility of the soil and the wonderful opportunities on the frontier, for James Bicknell decided to join them. Having bought the Kirchner claim for two hundred and sixty dollars, he hastily packed his household possessions into a wagon and on September 30th, "Father, Mother, and I" started for the Little Sioux country. There were three

teams in the little caravan of pioneers that moved out across the prairies to face a winter of terrible hardship on the frontier in Clay County.

The next entry in Jane's diary was on Sunday, November 23rd. Meanwhile they had arrived at their destination and found shelter in the Kirchner cabin — as many as twenty people in the one room. The Kirchners had chosen a new homestead across the Little Sioux about a half mile to the north where they erected another cabin. The town of Peterson now includes the site of this place, and the log cabin is still preserved.

Thanksgiving was celebrated with "rice pudding and elk meat for supper." The Kirchners had moved over to their new home, so that the Bicknells were alone for the first time on the last Sunday in November. Yet not entirely alone. "We have been visited by an Indian today," wrote Jane. "He came in without rapping, lit his pipe and commenced smoking. He called water 'meny' and we could not make out what he wanted until he made motions." Though she had not seen any other Indians she suspected that there were more in the neighborhood. "The one that was here had a blanket over his head." From that time on the presence of the Indians and their doings provided a constant refrain in Jane Bicknell's diary.

As soon as the Kirchners were settled across the river, Jacob Kirchner, in company with three other men, started to Cedar Falls for supplies. It was

late in the season to undertake such a trip, and doubtless the party would have gone earlier had it not been for the urgent need of completing the new log cabin. But food was becoming scarce. A new stock had to be obtained if these people were to live through the winter, even though they subsisted upon the barest necessities.

During the first part of December, Mr. Bicknell was busy building a partition in their cabin and making furniture. One day "Father made a lounge", and the next day he "made a chair, horse, and stool." The women cooked and washed and sewed. Jane and Mary Kirchner began "to read the Bible through".

Meanwhile the Indians were becoming more numerous. Following the course of the Little Sioux River, they were migrating slowly southward from Minnesota where game was scarce and the weather growing uncomfortably cold for them in their "tents made of cotton cloth". Scarcely a day passed when the cabins of the settlers were not visited by several hungry Sioux. But the meager provisions were invariably shared with the uninvited guests as though they were really welcome. If the savage instincts of the Indians should be provoked by any sign of hostility, they might not have stopped short of violence in appeasing their anger.

But the settlers were always on guard. When six Indians visited the Bicknell cabin, Gust Kirchner came over "because he thought we would be afraid."

He took the Indians home with him and gave them a loaf of bread and some pumpkins. What a neighborly act — to lure the Indians away at the price of precious food when the supply was rapidly becoming insufficient for the needs of a large family far off on the bleak frontier.

The next day another Indian came, and so did Gust. "They both ate dinner here. The Indian did not stop eating until he had eaten up everything there was on the table and then he smoked and went off." Bicknells were more fortunate than the Meads and Taylors, however, for eight Indians visited them.

December 9th was wash day. "About 10 o'clock the Indians commenced to come. I and mother were afraid and went to Mr. Kirchner's to have some of them come over here, so Gust came. When we got home there were 17 Indians here. We gave them something to eat and they went off and Gust went down in the woods". But three of them returned for supper. About dark Gust reported that fifty Indians were camped down by the river. "Gust, John, Phil, and I went down to see them." What a wash day!

Ironing day was scarcely better, however. "Had 11 Indians here to breakfast", recorded Miss Bicknell. "Father gave one of them his cap." A little later "Mary, Gust, John, Phil, and Mr. Kirchner came over to see how we were getting along with the Indians."

This party of Indians seems to have moved on, for no more were seen for a few days. But on December 15th, another wash day, five stalwart braves appeared at the Bicknell cabin. They were more tractable, however, than the squaw who came the next day. "I helped her take off her blanket", wrote Jane, "and she stayed here a spell and we gave her something to eat and then she did not go and she smelt so that we could not stand it and father went to Kirchner's to have Gust come over."

Gust Kirchner, by the way, had been across the plains to California, and had had more experience with Indians than any of the other neighbors, so he was considered a very able ally to have near. Mere Indian lore would scarcely explain the frequency of his visits to the Bicknell home, however. Perhaps the continual recurrence of his name in Jane's diary offers a more enlightening clue to his neighborly attentions.

On this occasion the resourceful Gust came over, the squaw was given some food to take with her, and then Gust told her "to 'pu-che-kee' which is the Indian for 'go'. Then he put on her bonnet and pinned her blanket around her. Father took her budget and carried it a little ways for her and then put it on her back, and then he came back." In spite of the obvious necessity of getting the old woman to move on, Jane adds a glint of pity. "We could hear her cry a great ways, for she was so lame she could scarcely go."

On December 22nd the Bicknells heard that the Indians had taken a pocketbook out of one of Mrs. Taylor's boxes "that had notes in it to the amount of $700, also all of the flour she had." This was a grave loss. No one could eat the money, but out on the snow-covered prairie the loss of the flour bordered upon tragedy.

Let no one suppose that these settlers had been careless or unmindful of the danger of starvation. That was their omnipresent horror, and all efforts to obtain additional provisions proved fruitless. On December 23rd Jacob Kirchner returned from his trip to Cedar Falls for supplies. The party had reached the settlement on Lizard Creek west of the Des Moines River, where they had to leave their teams and wagons and proceed on foot. "They traveled night and day, lived three days with nothing to eat but raw fresh meat. There were three of them, and one of the men came very near freezing". Jake Kirchner froze his feet so badly that he was crippled for months, and was in such pain he could not sleep. The diary describes the home treatment vividly. "Mr. Kirchner was here to get some spirits of turpentine to put on Jake's feet where he froze them. He thinks his toe nails will all come off." Not till January 28th was he able to go across to the Bicknell cabin, when his feet were "almost well".

On the day following Jake's return, Gust Kirchner and six men set out to retrieve the abandoned supplies back on the Lizard. Taking a team of horses

and a sled loaded with hay and two yoke of oxen to break the way through, they made a desperate effort. But in the intense cold, with snow four feet deep on the level and far deeper in places, little progress could be made across the trackless waste. On January 1, 1857, the party returned, unable to secure the much-needed food. Hope of living through the winter well-nigh vanished.

Meanwhile, "Mr. Williams who lives 8 miles down the river was here after some flour; he says they have had nothing to eat but potatoes for 3 weeks. Teams have gone out for provisions, but the snow is so deep that they can not get in. We let him have 16 lbs. of flour."

H. H. Waterman's family, south of these settlers, was reported to have "no bread stuff at all", while it was said that "Mrs. Mead will not let her children have as much as they want to eat." E. Weaver and the Gillett brothers, a few miles up the river, were living on beef and frozen turnips. No wonder Jane's diary proclaims, "We are sure afraid we shall all starve to death."

For some weeks during January and February, there had been a respite from the fear of Indian visits, but on February 13th news came that a band was at Waterman's cabin. The Indians had made serious inroads on the settlers' provisions at the beginning of the winter. The small remnant of supplies could not last long against their insatiable appetites. Yet the white people dared not refuse to

share their food. "Father did not know what to do. He went over to see what Mr. Kirchner thought best to do. They thought it best for us to move over there, so we did. Mr. K., Gust, Mary, Jake, John and Phil came over and helped us, and in about two hours we were over there. There were 20 of us, all in their house together."

This hasty departure precluded taking all of their valuables or even the kitchen utensils and furniture, but the Bicknells knew how to bury flour and other provisions so that not even Indians could find them. A week later, when they considered it safe to return to their own cabin, they found the "partition torn down, tea-kettle gone," and the spider, the carpet, and the spinning wheel were also missing. Curiosity or vandalism, certainly not the desire to spin, must have prompted them to take "mother's wheel"!

In the meantime, Gust, Jake, Mr. Taylor, and Mr. Shoots went down to Waterman's to see if the Indians had hurt him. There they discovered he had been "pounded with a stick of wood" and his wife's shawl stolen. Apparently the hungry savages were in no mood to tolerate resistance. On the morning of February 15th they "searched our house and Mr. K's. Took all the flour and Indian meal they had." Here the foresight of these pioneers saved them, for Jane adds in her diary, "We let Mr. K. have three hundred pounds that we had buried down cellar."

Mrs. Charlotte Kirchner Butler, who lives in

Peterson, was then a child of ten years, upon whose mind this terrible day's events were indelibly impressed. She tells that the family had agreed to be friendly with the Indians and to yield to their demands, unless they attempted to take the women or girls — then they would fight to the death. Accordingly, when they looked out, on the morning of February 15th and saw nine horribly painted Sioux warriors approaching, it was the signal for every one to be brave and calm.

Gust Kirchner, knowing most about Indian ways, opened the cabin door and stepped out to greet them. The beloved shepherd dog, who hated Indians, dashed out with him and just as the door closed a shot was heard.

"Oh, father," cried young John Kirchner, "they have shot Gust." But before this horror could be grasped, the door opened, and in walked Gust, smiling and cheerful, escorting the unwelcome guests. It was the poor dog whose life had been taken and his carcass later made a wonderful "stew" in the Indian camp!

"How in the world my brother Augustin could have such self-control, I never could understand, but he went out smiling and came back in smiling", declares Mrs. Butler.

One of the Kirchner oxen had died just before this, and the Indians, cutting huge chunks from the dead animal, made known that they wished the meat cooked at once. The young women very quickly had

the kettles boiling, but the Indians, from greed or preference, did not wait for the beef to be cooked. Snatching a piece from the kettle, still oozing blood, they cut it into chunks and, sitting down at the table where there was a bowl of sorghum, they dipped the bloody meat into the molasses and proceeded to gorge themselves.

During all these proceedings, Mrs. Kirchner had sat quietly watching the girls do the work. Her sitting still was mainly due to the fact that she had hastily hidden the one precious kitten, pet of the family, beneath her apron, fearing that the cat would share the fate of the dog. But, seeing things now moving satisfactorily, she arose, put the kitten gently beneath the counterpane of the bed, and began to assist in serving the raw meat. The whole family was in fear of the Indians, but probably the greatest apprehension in the mind of every one, at the time, was that the kitten might move! Instinct, however, or feline cunning, caused it to lie still, and its prized life was saved, to the great joy of the children.

The Indians helped themselves to many things — food and articles of clothing — until finally Mrs. Kirchner, seeing the choicest of her pillow slips used for bags and her children's clothing being taken, grabbed the articles from the Indians and said in German, "I want that for my papoose." Strange to say, this action was not resented and the band soon left, having harmed no one. The Kirchner family

always attributed their immunity from serious harm at the hands of the Sioux to the fact that they spoke German all the time. The Sioux were friendly to the French traders and may have mistaken the German language for French.

For several days the Indians remained in the neighborhood. They killed a cow and devoured most of the meat. At intervals they returned to the Kirchner cabin and searched for food and ammunition, but without finding the supplies and weapons hidden in a snow-drift.

When they broke camp and moved east along the river toward the Mead and Taylor cabin, Gust and Jacob Kirchner followed them, hoping to be of some aid to these families, since Mr. Mead was not at home. But the Indians threatened them with guns and knives. They took Jake's pistol away from him, so that the two men could do nothing but watch while the Indians searched the house, took what they wanted, drove off the ponies, and killed two oxen, a dog, and the chickens. The warriors seemed to be growing more violent, for they smashed the furniture, knocked the people about, and finally took Mrs. Taylor and Harriet Mead to their camp and made them stay all night. In the morning, however, they were released and Inkpaduta proceeded up the river with his band of painted warriors, killing live stock and playing havoc in the cabins of the settlers. "They killed all of Mr. Frink's cattle, took everything he had in his house, emptied the feather beds,

and broke out the windows." From Ezra Wilcox they stole five horses. Every day they seemed to grow more violent and bloodthirsty.

Evidently Harriet Mead was not overcome by her sojourn with the Indians, however, for on February 25th Jane Bicknell "went over to Mr. K's with Mary and Harriet. Stayed all day and learned how to make wheel collars." What a blessing, that after all of the horrors they had experienced these girls could compose their nerves, and spend a day tatting wheels for collars!

By the first of March, the settlers along the Little Sioux were so incensed against the Indians that E. Weaver and the Gillett brothers started for Fort Dodge "to get men to come in and take the Indians." They lost their way on the prairie, however, and finally reached a settlement on the Coon River where they mustered about twenty men and started north. At Kirchner's they wanted "Gust and Jake to go with them up to Spirit Lake in pursuit of the Indians." After going as far as Spencer, without seeing any Indians, the company turned homeward on March 8th, the very day of the massacre at Spirit Lake. "How thankful we ought to feel that our lives were so miraculously spared from the band of armed savages", wrote Jane in her diary when she heard of the awful tragedy.

After these harrowing experiences with Indians, hunger, and cold, it would seem that these brave people deserved peace and an early spring. But the

snow was slow in melting. On March 16th, when Jane went up to Mead's, the snow crust broke at almost every step so that she "had a fine time of it." Even after the first of April it was "very cold" and the incessant wind blew "very hard", though the snow was "nearly all gone". Two weeks later the water in the Little Sioux was so high that the boat in which Jake and Gust tried to cross capsized. "They were in nearly an hour" and when they finally reached the Bicknell cabin "they were so cold they could scarcely speak." By April 24th the weather was milder and Jane was busy boiling sap. That day she "made 60 lbs. of sugar."

Apparently all was calm and serene, but on April 25th, when she went over to the neighbors, "Father Kirchner came home and sayed, 'Jane go home. The Indians are up on the Des Moines River and are going to come down to kill us.' " Within two hours the Meads, Kirchners, and Bicknells were on their way to the Coon. On the following afternoon they reached "Stormy Lake" where they were joined by other neighbors and camped for the night. The refugees then numbered thirty-five. At Sac City they paused, and "spies were sent out to see if there were any Indians around." In a few days they were convinced that their hasty flight had been occasioned by a false alarm. Thereupon the families returned to their cabins on the Little Sioux, put in their crops, and raised enough grain and vegetables so that starvation never stared them in the face again.

On October 17, 1857, Jane Bicknell and Gust Kirchner were married. They "went to Fort Dodge with one ox-team" on their honeymoon, "and were gone from home 7 days." Just one month after the wedding they moved onto their own claim of three hundred and twenty acres "and commenced keeping house" in a log cabin twenty-four by sixteen feet. They had "a span of horses, a yoke of oxen, 2 pigs, 3 chickens, one breaking plow, one common plow, a table, chairs, a stove, and 60 yds. of cotton cloth." After all that had happened during her first year on the frontier, who could question Jane's final statement in her diary: "I think we are well situated."

Bessie L. Lyon